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## Arson experts to sift debris in fire at Arabs' church

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A special federal arson team will converge on a fire-gutted Los Altos Hills church today searching for the cause of the weekend blaze that some fear may have been set intentionally to target the largely Arab American Christian congregation.

The 18-member team from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms will methodically sift debris for clues to the fire Sunday at Antiochian Orthodox Church of the Redeemer, ATF spokeswoman Marti McKee said yesterday. Dispatched from across the country, the squad includes experts on explosives and arson as well as dog teams that can sniff out traces of flammable liquids and chemicals.

"We're bringing out our full resources, including our specialty people," McKee said. "We still don't know if there was a crime or not. There's a lot of devastation here. The debris is probably covering up the point of origin."

Meanwhile, Bay Area congressional leaders issued a joint letter praising the swift federal action and urging Attorney General John Ashcroft and Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill "to use every tool at your disposal to pursue a full federal investigation into this tragedy."

The lawmakers noted that 90 percent of the congregation is Arab American, and members said more than half of the church's families are Palestinian.

"Given the ongoing escalation of violence between Palestinians and Israelis in the Middle East, church parishioners and many in the city of Los Altos Hills and its surrounding communities are questioning whether this fire was deliberately set," the letter said. It was signed by Reps. Anna Eshoo, George Miller, Zoe Lofgren, Sam Farr, Mike Thompson, Michael Honda, Ellen Tauscher, Pete Stark and Tom Lantos, all Bay Area Democrats.

No churchgoers or firefighters were hurt in the three-alarm fire, which was reported at 4:30 a.m. Sunday and caused an estimated \$1 million in damage. The conflagration gutted the huge church and caused flames to shoot hundreds of feet into the air. The church's stained glass windows, towering dome, large wooden cross and holy icons including paintings of the saints were destroyed.

The head of the church, the Rev. Samer Youssef, was unavailable to comment about the push by congressional representatives for a thorough federal probe. Many members of the estimated 300 families that worship at the church are first-, second- and third-generation immigrants from Palestinian territories, Syria, Lebanon and Egypt.

Investigators said there were no reports of threats against the church, but church members recalled that last year, vandals broke a church window, inserted a hose and flooded the building.

The Antiochian Orthodox Church was founded in Damascus, Syria, and dates to apostles Peter and Paul. Scripture refers to Antioch as the place where the followers of Jesus Christ were first called "Christians."

There are 265 Antiochian Orthodox churches across the United States and Canada, including churches in San Francisco, Orinda and Cupertino.

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